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TAGS: PHUM PREL KIRF VM RELFREE HUMANR ETMIN

SUBJECT: NORTHERN PROTESTANTS REPORT SOME RELIGIOUS FREEDOM PROGRESS

1. (SBU) Summary: On September 6, Pastor Au Quang Vinh of the Evangelical Church of Vietnam (ECVN) shared with Poloff his impressions of the status of religious freedom in Northern Vietnam. He noted that his organization's recent interactions with the GVN have been mostly positive, though there is some divergence between official GVN policies on religion and local authorities' interpretation. He said the ECVN is encouraging congregations to approach local officials to begin registration and to educate authorities about GVN policies. Though this strategy has not been completely successful, Vinh seemed pleased with the overall success of the ECVN's efforts to "change the mood" of local officials, leading to fewer arrests and less harassment of Protestants. Vinh also reiterated the ECVN's desire for official GVN recognition of title to their Hanoi property. End Summary.

2. (SBU) At a September 6 meeting with Poloff, Pastor Au Quang Vinh, General Secretary and Senior Pastor of the Evangelical Church of Vietnam - North (ECVN) shared his impressions of the status of religious freedom in Northern Vietnam from the perspective of Vietnamese Protestants. Vinh said that his organization's recent interaction with the GVN has been mostly positive, although there is still some divergence between the central government's official policies on individual beliefs and religions and the local authorities' interpretation of those policies. He stated that despite this, the ECVN is actively encouraging rural congregations to approach their local People's Committee officials in order to begin the registration process in line with the GVN's new policies.

3. (SBU) Pastor Vinh observed that the ECVN's local engagement strategy has not been completely successful. On several occasions their sub-parishioner's approaches have elicited an official rebuff and increased difficulties with local officials who had previously ignored their existence. These setbacks notwithstanding, Vinh expressed satisfaction with the overall success of the ECVN's engagement. He noted that most local authorities are "changing their mood" which has resulted in fewer arrests and less harassment of Northern Protestants. Pastor Vinh explained that part of the strategy is to educate local authorities about the GVN's own policies on religious freedom and to explain to these local officials what the protestant religion is and is not. Vinh proudly provided examples of the documents that the central church and its sub-groups use for this purpose, including: the official GVN handbook on belief and religion which outlines official policy, Communist Party General Secretary Nong Duc Manh's statement on religious freedom,

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and a copy of the first issue of "Thong Cong" a bi-weekly bulletin newly printed by the ECVN (with GVN permission) which includes prominent photos of Deputy Prime Minister Vu Khoan posing with church leaders at a recent church conference. He noted, however, that even faced with these incontrovertible documents some People's Committee apparatchiks in the provinces still refuse to accept the change in the central government's policy. One (unnamed) People's Committee chairman reportedly scoffed that the official policy is "only official in Hanoi."

4. (SBU) Pastor Vinh said that he was pleased on the whole with the ECVN's educational outreach efforts and the GVN's response overall, even considering the opposition of some local officials. In particular, he noted that several Hmong congregations in the Northwest Highlands area positively changed the local authorities' views towards them after explaining that although Hmong protestants often refer to Jesus Christ with the honorific term of address "Vang Chu" (phonetic), they should not be confused with Laotian militant groups who worship a different "Vang Chu" as has happened in the past. Pastor Vinh expressed confidence that similar educational efforts would continue to lower local officials' apprehensions about church efforts to organize in the rural North.

5. (SBU) Returning to one of his perennial complaints, Vinh reiterated the ECVN's desire to receive official GVN recognition of their title to the Hanoi property on which their church compound resides. He noted that it is impossible for the congregation to improve or reconstruct

their dilapidated facilities until they have clear title and asked the Embassy to raise this issue with the GVN whenever possible.

16. (SBU) COMMENT: Pastor Vinh's upbeat attitude about the future for religious freedom in the North has held solid since the issuance of the Prime Minister's instruction on religion in the Spring of 2005. We are encouraged by the success of the ECVN's educational outreach policy at overcoming local authorities' resistance, which remains the greatest obstacle to religious freedom in the North. The condescending behavior of the unidentified People's Committee Chairman is, unfortunately, quite plausible and characteristic of resistance in some provinces to Hanoi's interference in what they feel is a local concern. Continued attention to the issue by U.S. Embassy officers in Hanoi combined with the ECVN's grassroots education efforts in the provinces will remain the best strategy for institutionalizing recent gains for Protestants in the North.

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